Pod Mapping for Mutual Aid

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(Click HERE to find a printable pod mapping worksheet, as well as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's Half Assed Disabled Prepper Tips for Preparing for a Coronavirus Quarantine.)

Mutual aid can look many different ways. Those of us who are sick and disabled, black, indigenous, multiracial, and people of color, poor, working class, immigrants, queer, trans, two spirit, and more, probably already practice mutual aid and may not even know it. Mutual aid is that random person from the internet bringing a hot meal when you can't get out of bed, it's cleaning or spiritually cleansing the home of someone who's too severely depressed to do it themselves, it's staying up late talking to that suicidal friend, helping unpack an apartment after someone moves, giving rides to chemo, visiting or writing letters to folks in prison, walking someone's dogs when they can't walk them themself. It can also look like sharing coping skills, survival skills, job search skills. Mutual aid can be sharing medicine, making medicine, helping sift through allopathic doctors to find a good fit, or referring someone to that awesome working class naturopath you know. Mutual aid can also be fighting to change the structural causes of oppression so that everyone can be more free.

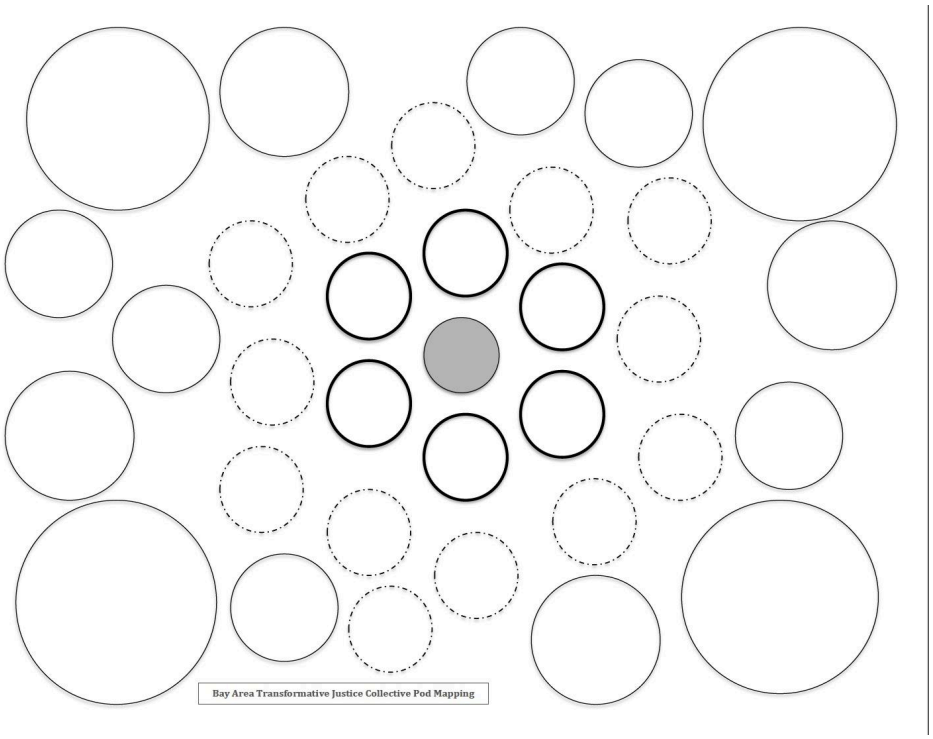
I'm writing this as COVID-19 is taking hold in my region, people are talking about social distancing as a form of survival, and I'm thinking about all the people who are already housebound and having a hard time making ends meet, getting needs met, and who need social support to survive. I'm thinking of my houseless and elderly neighbors, my immunocompromised friends who may need food but also protection from any germs I may be carrying. I'm thinking about how we survive *together* rather than apart. Even if together means Zoom hangouts, texting, leaving groceries on the doorstep and not coming in to say hi.

Mutual aid can happen between two, twenty, or two hundred people (or more!). A good place to start, though, is with your "people." Whether that's your one best friend, some folks from church, or the handful of acquaintances you never hang out with but who came through that one time when things were really tough, it's important to assess who would show up for you in a crisis or emergency, and who you'd do the same for.

This is where "pod mapping" comes in. Originally developed by Mia Mingus for the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, pod mapping is a tool specifically for accountability and dealing with harm in communities. However, it can also be adapted to help you assess who you can rely on in a pinch—who you'd turn to for support and who would turn to you. These groups may or may not overlap. You may also have different pods for different situations.

A “pod” is a microcosm of “community.” Since it’s more concrete, it’s easier to get organized—to connect, make a plan, and follow through if and when it’s needed. There may be certain qualities you look for in the folks in your pod(s): maybe they’re really reliable, well-resourced, generous, committed, kind. Maybe they have certain skills that you don’t and need. Maybe they live nearby.

Here’s what the pod mapping worksheet looks like:



In the center circle, write your name.

The dark circles are your pod. It’s important to write specific names, as well as what supports they can provide. Is it a neighbor who has a generator that will charge your wheelchair when the electricity is out? Is it someone who can buy and drop off groceries? What about a friend who will take care of you when you’re sick? Talk to your people and ask what they feel able to provide. Then ask them what they need from you to be in *their* pod, or let them know what you can offer. (Mutual aid is mutual.)

The dotted lines are people who are movable—they could become part of your pod if you have some conversations and build relationships.

The larger circles on the outside are bigger community groups, networks, organizations, etc that could be resources for you.

Here's my pod map as an example. I don't have everyone's skills written down because I still need to have those conversations. But as I have more information, I can continue to fill it in. Like, "Do you want to be part of my disaster survival mutual aid pod? OK cool, what do you feel like you can contribute? I can bring meals and groceries, provide emotional support, and have a couple extra inhalers. We have a safe place where you can come and stay in our guest room if you need it."

(Image description: whiteboard with circles in four different colors and names in each circle. My name in the middle pink circle. My pod in purple circles. Moveable people in teal dotted circles around the pod. Groups where I can get support in red circles at the outside.)

Use this tool in the way that works for you. And don't forget where it came from—this is a resource created by BATJC to designate who could be a support in being accountable for harm, holding someone else accountable for harm, or who could help you if you witnessed harm. Honor where it came from and who created it.

Lots of love,
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